

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
July 11, 2016
6:00 p.m.**

Mayor Joseph M. Butler, Jr. Presiding

Present: Council Member Cody J. Horbacz
Council Member Stephen A. Jennings
Council Member Teresa R. Macaluso
Mayor Joseph M. Butler, Jr.

Not Present: Council Member Mark C. Walczyk
Sharon Addison, City Manager

City staff present: Shawn McWayne, Michael Lumbis, Jeff Polkowski, Brian Phelps

DISCUSSION

Mayor Butler started the meeting by stating that for the record Councilmember Walczyk received orders from the U.S. Army and will not be attending tonight's Work Session as well as next Monday's meeting.

Consolidated Funding Application Opportunities

Michael Lumbis, Planning and Community Development Director and Leann West from Strategic Development Specialists gave a presentation on Consolidated Funding Application Projects (CFA) (on file in the City Clerks office).

Mr. Lumbis started the presentation by explaining that he wanted to update Council on a project that they have been looking at for at least the last month or so and also talk about a project that has just surfaced in the last week. He said that approximately two months ago the CFA announced the first round of opportunities and he began looking to try to identify different projects that might fit the various grants the State has to offer. He explained that the City looks at the capital budget and the requirements for the projects that can not always fit into the capital budget but would be a good candidate for a grant application. He told Council that one project that he has been looking into is parking improvements at the Fairgrounds behind the grandstand. He suggested the reconstruction of the existing gravel parking lot behind the grandstand and adding 50 new spaces. He explained the existing lot is uneven and there is a lack of defined spaces and is not aesthetically appealing. He then pointed out that there are multiple users of the parking lot and gave examples of the Fair and sporting events at the YMCA. He explained to Council that this project could fit one of the grant programs available. He said that one of the grant programs the State offers is the Renovation Grant Program which utilizes unique storm water structure techniques with the idea of improving water quality and with the close proximity of the Black River, this project is a good candidate for the funding. He also stated that the approximate cost is \$525,000 excluding lighting and the City match of 10% or \$52,500.00. He clarified that the match can be comprised of in-kind services such as Engineering or preliminary construction work by DPW crews with minimal impact to the budget.

In response to Mayor Butler's request for clarification, Mr. Lumbis explained that the project would involve the reconstruction of the lot to include several green infrastructures including permeable pavements, rain gardens/storm water planters and storm water trees.

Mayor Butler questioned how this project would fit into improving the water quality.

Mr. Lumbis explained that the rain water will seep into the ground and be piped directly into the River instead of a storm sewer which would be treated by allowing it to filter into the ground and then to a filter media which then leads directly to the river. He added that he is also looking into rain barrels to catch storm water from the grandstand roof which can then be used for irrigating the fields. He pointed out that there could also be an option to turn a valve that could release water slowly over time.

Mayor Butler asked how big the rain barrels are and if they are above ground.

Mr. Lumbis answered that they are over 500 gallons and they are above ground.

Mayor Butler asked for a picture.

Jeff Polkowski, City Planner pointed out to Mayor Butler where the barrels will be placed and noted that they can be painted any color and there are different suppliers. He told Council that the water could be used for rinsing off City vehicles.

Mr. Lumbis explained to Council that there are approximately 7 or 8 different techniques that can be utilized for the grants and was able to use 4 on this project and stressed the more that is used raises the project score.

Ms. West addressed Council and explained that they had telephone conferences with Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) to make sure that the project was fitting in with their stated goals of the program. She summarized that they informed her that the City is on track with the goals. She also pointed out that the techniques can be spread out into the community and with well based signage it will be educational for the community.

Mayor Butler said he likes the idea and to do the best job possible to make it attractive and blend into the grandstand. He asked what type of State agency would be involved.

Ms. West explained that currently there are a couple programs that can be used for a project such as this, including The NYS Office of Parks which offers EPF Funds thru the consolidated funding application. She noted that typically the mass amount award is \$500,000.

Mr. Lumbis expressed concern that Watertown was not selected for the Downtown Revitalization Plan (DPR) grants. He pointed out that Downtown still has a lot of good projects going on and wants to keep them going. He said that ideas have been discussed as to what can be done to capitalize on that momentum and keep moving forward. He told Council that there is a possible opportunity thru Empire State Development Strategic Planning and Feasibility Studies Program. He explained that the objectives of the program are to create strategic development plans, promote economic development by encouraging economic and employment opportunities and stimulating development of communities and

urban areas and to focus on economic development purposes and preferences given to projects located in highly distressed areas.

Mr. Lumbis explained to Council that the DRP is a 50% grant and 50% match. At least 10% cash equity must be provided and the remainder of the match can be in-kind costs, other cash match or other grant funding. He then summarized what the potential plan components for the project are such as reviewing of zoning and land use, housing and signage, among many others.

Council Member Jennings asked Mr. Lumbis about any funding available for the park pool. He noted that he took a tour of the whole pool and expressed concern that the mechanics of the pool are in terrible condition, saying they will have to be removed and rebuilt. He also noted that the foundation of the pool seems sound but may need to be resurfaced.

Council Member Macaluso reminded Council that several years ago the idea of a salt water pool was discussed.

Mayor Butler informed Council that Council Member Walcyk had concerns about downtown parking. He had mentioned the possibility of a parking garage. He said Council Member Walcyk mentioned Stone Street and also behind the Library and Ag Building on Washington Street, as well as where the old Woolworth Building was between Cams Pizza and the building on the other side. He said the City would have to talk to the private owners of the properties to see if it is something they would want any potential partnership.

Mr. Lumbis replied that the suggestion is not a bad idea, however, there are a lot small details that have to be addressed and said it could take a while to develop a project scope for a project of that size. He noted that at this point the main focus lies on DRP, the Fairgrounds parking lot and the pool, splash pad and bath house. He added that plans for the project could be doable within the next 3 weeks.

Council Member Horbacz pointed out that there is not a lot of seating outside Downtown and around the restaurants and coffee shops. He said the owner of Mr. Biggs Restaurant stopped him and the City has been giving him a hard time about outside seating. He added that Mr. Biggs said he called Code Enforcement and was told he could not have seating.

Shawn McWayne, Code Enforcement Supervisor, said he would have to go thru the City Manager's Office and provide proof of insurance and that there is enough room for the tables and chairs.

Council Member Horbacz asked if Mr. McWayne knows of any restrictions as far as how much room is needed.

Mr. McWayne said there has to be at least a 5 to 6 foot wide sidewalk for pedestrians to be able to use and a license for outdoor seating is needed. He noted that Vito's and Bistro 108 have chairs out and he does not believe it is anything the City is against doing. He stressed that the main factors are insurance and having enough room on the sidewalk.

Mayor Butler asked about any funds that might be available for the Masonic Temple and Lincoln Building.

Mr. Lumbis said that there are historic renovation grants but was unclear at the moment how they work with private property owners.

Abandoned Properties

Brian Phelps, City Assessor, started the discussion by introducing his report on Foreclosures and Abandoned Homes. He stated that the purpose of the report is to inform Council on “Zombie Homes” (on file in the City Clerk's Office) the main focus being on foreclosed and abandon homes. He pointed out that prior to this study there was never any tracking these homes. He explained that he started the search using several different sources. One of the sources was the County Clerk's Office where they were able to start the search beginning in 2013. He said that a lot of the information can be pulled from water account records, explaining that when a water meter has been removed that is a good sign that house is abandoned. He said they also rely on water meter readers to keep them informed of any houses that appear vacant or has the meter pulled. He stated that he went through the records in the Assessor's Department and took the ones listed as being owned by a lending institution, he then summarized that there were 51 assessment property records with owners listed as lending institutions and 8 properties reported to the Assessor's office by the public or other departments. He highlighted that there were 356 properties that he personally inspected to try to determine their status. He explained that it is not an easy process to determine if a house is simply empty or abandoned. He informed Council that the findings of the physical inspections showed that 52 were bank or institution owned, 14 of which were obtained via deed in lieu of foreclosure; 13 appear to be actively marketed for sale, Department of Veterans Affairs has title to 19, Wells Fargo and US Bank each have title to 5 and 6 properties appear to be occupied. He noted that 7 months is the median that these properties have been held. There are 187 that are not bank owned, 20 have new owners and are no longer in foreclosure proceedings, 71 appear to be currently occupied, 26 judgments of foreclosure, 98 appear vacant/abandoned, 4 properties were vacant but under going renovations. Water meters were removed from 86 properties not owned by banks, 15 of those properties are for sale, 53 appeared to be abandoned, 3 appeared to be occupied, 15 appeared vacant but noted it was difficult to determine if they actually were vacant. He added that each of these houses have their own story with each circumstance being different but the main story seems to be that the owner is deceased with no next of kin.

Mayor Butler asked Mr. Phelps if there is any contact with the banks and inquired about a new law that makes it mandatory to have a list of banks and lending institutions.

Mr. Phelps explained that they send the banks tax notice reminders three times a year informing them that it is to their advantage to sell the house. He said there is a State law that has been passed that also establishes a data base of who actually has control of the property but he has not seen it as of yet.

Mayor Butler asked that if 98 properties are abandoned and 52 are bank/institution owned should the City be pursuing them.

Mr. Phelps stated that the 52 bank owned properties are being processed through the bank system at a pretty good rate.

Mayor Butler expressed concern about 165 Ten Eyck Street pointing out that there are broken windows and animals living in there, most likely there are people in there also and asked Mr. Phelps what the plan is for it.

Mr. Phelps clarified that it is a Code Enforcement issue. He pointed out that there is no law in the City that is against having an empty house.

Mayor Butler stressed to do everything possible from the Codes standpoint. He said he has tried to personally call the bank but they did not have any answers and they are not returning any emails.

Mr. Phelps summarized that the current market conditions have been declining for the last three years from 175 in 2013, to 132 in 2015. He added that according to NYS Tax and Finance the average value of residential properties in the City has dropped by 2.7% and 6.5% in the past two years and the median time from bank acquisition to resale is 9.5 months. He summarized that there appears to be a large variance in the abilities or willingness of local property managers to manage and maintain properties. State law requires only that a property manager be a licensed realtor in order to offer the properties for rent.

Mr. McWayne informed Mayor Butler that 367 West main Street is now ready to be sold.

Work session ended at 7:45p.m.

Margaret M Puccia
Deputy City Clerk